Pewabic Tiles

Look carefully at Michigan State University’s Kellogg Chapel, the lobby of the Cathedral Ballroom, or the fireplace at the University’s Memorial Chapel, and you might notice something unique. The tiles that adorn these buildings, made from the Michigan river clays on which they were built, are the creations of one Mary Chase Perry Stratton. Mary Chase Perry Stratton’s Pewabic Pottery is a National Landmark and her innovative art continues to grow as an art form today. Mary Chase Perry Stratton is often referred to as the “Mother of Michigan Art Pottery.”

Discovering a Glaze

For many years, Mary Chase Perry experimented with glazes—liquids applied to clay—until she heated at high temperatures to form a hard surface. She experimented for minutes, hours, and days to form the perfect combination that became indescribable—looking like glass reflecting rainbows. In 1906, Perry discovered a special glaze, which she called “Pewabic.” That means “purple and copper” in the Chippewa language. She chose the name after a mine called Pewabic in her hometown in the Upper Peninsula. The last step is to glaze the tile. You apply the glaze, as you would apply paint. Then you place the tile in a kiln to make the glaze hard. Over time, Perry systematized the production of glazed tiles and manufactured them in large quantities. They were used for floors, walls, libraries, churches, and other architectural features. Today, the Pewabic Pottery potters can reproduce some of her glazes, but not all of them. She did not leave recipes for everything she did. And today we know that some of the glazes are too poisonous to use. Other artists are developing recipes for new glazes at Pewabic Pottery.

Making Tiles

To make a ceramic tile first make a flat piece of clay. Then use a rubber mallet to pound it into a plaster mold that has the reverse of the design you want to make. Over the next few hours, the clay will shrink as the plaster mold absorbs the moisture from it. Then you need to remove the tile from the mold and rest it on a rack to dry. Some more. The clay needs to be completely dry before you place it in the huge kiln. If it’s wet, it can explode. It takes a week or two for the clay to dry completely. While baking in the kiln, the cold clay will transform into hard, cold, hard bisque. The last step is to glaze the tile. You apply the glaze, as you would apply paint. Then you need to fire (bake) the tile again. The high heat of the kiln creates a chemical reaction that causes the surface of the tile to look like glass.

Why didn’t Mary Chase Perry write recipes for glazes?

On three separate occasions, Mary Chase Perry said:

“Things To Do

✦ Click the link below to go to Mary Chase Perry’s birthday party at Pewabic Pottery, March 13 and 14.
✦ Visit the Pewabic Pottery, the Detroit Zoological Park, the Belle Isle Aquarium and the Library to see Pewabic tiles.
✦ Go to Mary Chase Perry’s birthday party at Pewabic Pottery, March 13 and 14 and meet the author and illustrator of FIRE MAGIC, Detroit’s Pewabic Pottery Treasurer Mary Walker Fisher, illustrated by Magneto Heights Simon.
✦ Visit the Great Depression Gallery and the 1920s Gallery to see Pewabic tiles.
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Mary Chase Perry Stratton

Mary Chase Perry was born in 1867 in Hancock, Michigan, in copper mining country in the Upper Peninsula. When she was ten, she moved to Detroit. At twenty, she went to study china painting and sculpture at the Art Academy in Cincinnati, Ohio. She returned to Detroit. Her next-door neighbor, Horace Caullkins, was a dentist. He invented a kiln to heat clay to make dentures—false teeth made from porcelain.

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